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Strengthening Africa's Capacity to Design and Implement Strategies for Food and Nutrition Security

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To reduce food and nutrition insecurity, research-based policies and programs must be developed and implemented effectively. But in Sub-Saharan Africa, weak technical, financial, and administrative capacities and a serious lack of cooperation among relevant sectors have inhibited progress toward food security. As a result, after more than 50 years of technical and financial assistance, the number of severely malnourished people in the region continues to grow.

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The Millennium Development Goals set by the international development community challenge global, national, subnational, and community-level institutions to reduce hunger by half by 2015. Sub-Saharan Africa's meager human and institutional capacity for action is impeding the realization of this goal. With about 200 million malnourished people in Sub-Saharan Africa at present, a serious effort to build capacity to implement policies and programs is needed.

CHALLENGES TO CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Among the capacity-strengthening challenges the region faces (see Box 1 for definition of capacity strengthening) are inadequate in-country capacity, institutional weaknesses, lack of multidisciplinary approaches to problem solving, expatriates' limited in-country experience, poor governance, and failure to monitor the sustainability of development efforts and to plan for future capacity generation.

The capacity to design and implement successful food security policies and programs in Africa is weak from the global to the community level. External technical assistance aimed at strengthening human and institutional resources has had limited impact for four broad reasons:

1. weaknesses in identifying, designing, and implementing projects;
2. inadequate skills to address food and nutrition security policy issues;
3. inadequate management of technical assistance; and
4. poor local working environments.

Box 1—Capacity Strengthening for Food and Nutrition Security in Africa: The Concept

Capacity strengthening is the process by which individuals, groups, organizations, and communities enhance their ability to identify and meet food and nutrition security challenges in a sustainable manner. Central to the process are human capabilities (creativity, well-articulated values, positive motivations, and enhanced skills) and effective organizations (both government and civil society). In addition, sound institutional principles—laws, rules, and regulations—are crucially important. Capacity strengthening should therefore be viewed as a special dimension of the overall development process. The latter is often inadequately and narrowly conceived and hence measured by limited indices like increased GNP only; the time is ripe to broaden our understanding of development. In this context, strengthened capacity should be seen as a means of enabling societies to fulfill their needs in a sustainable manner. We emphasize that Africans must recognize that development partners can only offer resources and facilitate the process of ensuring food security; the implementation of policy and achievement of desired levels of food and nutrition security remain in the hands of Africans. Enhancing human resource capacity in African countries is therefore the foundation for achieving the overall goal of food and nutrition security in Africa.

And even when adequate capacity exists within a country, expatriates are often hired because donors require parallel operational structures to be implemented with their project units, or expatriates fill positions that the government cannot afford to fund, or local staff reject low-paying jobs with unattractive working conditions, or it is perceived that expatriates can do the job more effectively. But expatriates often lack the in-country experience needed to understand local problems and find appropriate solutions. Therefore, policies and programs implemented solely by expatriates have not been highly successful.

Public institutions often lack the necessary good governance to function properly at all, let alone to imple-

ment long-term food security policies and programs. National and local institutions may lack the ability to identify the imminent signs of an approaching food crisis. The sectors primarily responsible for food and nutrition security fail to collaborate with other sectors such as health, finance, and education. The capacity to design a comprehensive approach to food and nutrition security is also limited because data are inaccessible, multidisciplinary and multisector discussions are inadequate, institutional links are missing, and health factors such as HIV/AIDS have only recently been considered.

For policies and programs to be sustainable, the next generation of managers, program designers, and implementers must be developed. Many of today's university students are graduating with no understanding of food and nutrition security issues or the role they can play in promoting sustainable food security. Efforts to monitor institutional and human capacity gaps are deficient. Unless adequate attention is paid to the quality and quantity of capacity at various levels, progress toward achieving food and nutrition security goals will remain elusive.

Once initial projects are completed and donor funding and international expertise are withdrawn, how can countries sustain capacity-strengthening activities and prevent the best minds from leaving the country? For example, several years ago the Harvard Institute for International Development offered many in-country, short-term training programs, but the follow-up courses by local counterparts proved difficult to sustain after the donor withdrew. Program implementers must take steps to ensure the sustainability of such programs.

STRENGTHENING CAPACITY FOR POLICY AND PROGRAM DESIGN

Designing policies and programs for food and nutrition security is an evolving multi-step process. Africa needs to strengthen its capacity to detect and diagnose indicators of distress, to develop and execute relief programs during times of need, and to observe current changes and link them to future crises.

In Africa, where global and regional institutions play a key role in providing food and nutrition policy capacity, some safeguards are in place to prevent inappropriately designed programs from being implemented by global organizations. Yet foreign technical assistants continue to face challenges because they do not understand the culture, politics, governance, corruption, food habits, or market failures that exist in a region. Collaborating with national counterparts would enhance their understanding. Such collaboration should also create a sense of ownership among the local people and strengthen their ability to relate global food and nutrition goals to national strategies.

Within a country, most food and nutrition security actions are planned at the national level (or, in larger countries, at the provincial level). Government agencies, universities, and research institutions all contribute to policy design and implementation capacity. For policies and programs to be appropriately designed and adequately funded, donors, the government, and other institutions need to coordinate their activities. To strengthen cooperation, frequent national meetings of all potential donors, universities, research institutions, and policymakers should be held. These meetings should focus on the planning of current, medium-, and long-term activities to foster food and nutrition security. High-level participation is important for follow-up action. Emphasis should be on analyzing how past experience, research findings, foreign support, and technical outputs can all contribute to current and upcoming activities. Such coordination will help clarify the division of labor, leading to concentrated efforts, consistent policy promotion, and effective use of scarce resources. Donors and collaborating partners could also have access to a searchable database that consolidates the available information on projects and programs in a country. Close teamwork among foreign assistants, local experts, and development leaders would go a long way toward enabling African countries to address management weaknesses and accrue benefits from external support.

University training in Africa tends to focus on general education. This explains the preponderance of staff in policymaking organizations who have general training but limited expertise in the specifics of food and nutrition security. This significant skill gap should be addressed. The Regional Food Security Training Programme (RFSTP) of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has successfully bridged this gap by enhancing the ability of local academic institutions to undertake short-term training (see Box 2).

Short-term training in food and nutrition security policy is only a band-aid, however; the next generation of policymakers, policy advisors, and policy researchers requires training on food and nutrition security at the university level (see Box 3 for the example of the University of KwaZulu-Natal). Although institutional

Box 2—Short-Term Training and Strengthening of Academic Institutions

The Regional Food Security Training Programme (RFSTP) is a Southern African Development Community (SADC) regional initiative that aims to improve the knowledge and skills of staff working in public and private food security agencies. It uses existing capacity within the SADC region to provide food security training and increase the effectiveness of national and regional agencies concerned with food security policy analysis and implementation. It employs local expertise to identify training needs; strengthens human and institutional capacity through short courses and work attachment programs (in which personnel from one country are posted to an office, laboratory, or field in a another country for a specific task for a short period), and coordinates capacity-strengthening initiatives among countries in the region and with other regions. Each SADC country contributes to the program and has a contact person who is responsible for ensuring adequate participation by that country.

From 1995 to 1999, in its first phase, the program trained over 600 personnel through 18 courses and several work attachments. In addition to offering courses itself, it strengthened the capacity of local institutions to develop curricula and run courses and provided equipment to those institutions. By the end of 2001, 66 Regional Training Institutions, spread across 14 African countries, had registered for the second phase (2000–2005).

The program provides several lessons. First, a capacity-strengthening program should be anchored to a formal regional network. Second, local food security policy expertise should be used extensively in the training programs. Third, local training colleges and government administrative offices should be fully engaged in the program in order to strengthen their own institutional capacity. For more information see www.sadc-fanr.org.zw/fstp/fstp.htm.

Box 3—The University of KwaZulu-Natal's Food Security Programme

The University of KwaZulu-Natal's postgraduate Food Security Programme is a unique initiative that cuts across disciplines to train Africans actively involved in food security programs and research. Since its inception in 2001, students from 10 African countries have participated. The 23 trainees in the current class have diverse educational backgrounds.

Students begin their training with an interactive two-week short course facilitated by 15 discipline specialists. The introductory module actively explores the diversity, complexity, and interrelatedness of food security issues, which builds a sound foundation for exploring practical, sustainable solutions to food insecurity in Africa. Transdisciplinary course modules on food production, storage, and access; nutrition; sustainable livelihoods; food security information systems; and simulation modeling and food security research methodologies are offered through workshops and digital learning. Compulsory coursework components also include modules from other disciplines including public policy analysis and project design and evaluation. In addition, trainees take elective options from various disciplines and conduct research related to food security.

The program draws on the voluntary input and experience of 31 university academics in 15 disciplines (including agriculture, economics, nutrition, information studies, political science, theology, and engineering). Apart from the benefits that students derive from transdisciplinary team supervision, the program has drawn disparate academics together and strengthened staff collaboration through addressing complex food security issues that cannot be solved in any one discipline in isolation. At the same time staff retain strong roots within their own discipline for professional development and support. The teamwork has also attracted further funding for research and student scholarship opportunities. While many part-time students conduct research as part of their normal employment, graduates resume their positions or are redeployed to assist in food and agricultural research, policy formulation, food-aid monitoring, agricultural extension, advocacy, and training. More information on the program and its activities is available at www.ukzn.ac.za/foodsecurity.

parameters (rules and regulations) and policymaking and program implementing organizations are important, enhanced human capacity through higher education is the strongest pillar for developing local organizations.

Human and institutional capacity initiatives demonstrated by the RFSTP and KwaZulu-Natal cases are small, compared with the demand in Africa. They should be scaled up and multiplied across the continent.

Although knowledge about the different dimensions of the food security issue is the foundation for a better understanding of how disciplines can interact fruitfully to solve the problem of food insecurity, those who acquire this knowledge will mostly be in specific localities. Africa needs the capacity for a continuous dialogue on food security across countries. Through such interactions, the experiences of specific geographical and economic areas can be communicated to the rest of Africa, helping to identify interrelated household food security problems across countries. Institutional and organizational arrangements that have proved successful in addressing food security challenges in one country should be communicated to other countries where they can be replicated. Continental, regional, and subregional organizations such as SADC, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the East African Community (EAC) could facilitate such forums.

STRENGTHENING CAPACITY FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Mainstreaming food and nutrition policy within governments is crucial. Once a strategy for reducing food and nutrition insecurity is designed, institutional and organizational capacity to implement the strategy is imperative. Project and program implementation involves participation of trained professionals at the national, subnational, and local levels. At the national level, mainstreaming may take the form of placing personnel with technical expertise in key areas (such as food security and nutrition) at the Ministry of Finance, where they can ensure that food and nutrition security policies and programs receive high priority in resource allocation and implementation. Positions for food and nutrition experts should be of equal importance to those for other technical experts. Ideally, such positions would require postgraduate qualifications in agriculture, nutrition, economics, rural development, or the like, and a good comprehension of food policy and public administration. For example, the placement of the Food Security and Nutrition Unit in the Malawi Department of Economic Planning and Development made an important difference in the design of Malawi's national food security strategy. Mainstreaming may entail establishing a unit at the directorate level within a ministry, with adequate subordinate staff who are competent in rural development and food and nutrition security issues. Currently, Food Security is a full-fledged directorate in the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security in Tanzania. These two examples are worth emulating in other ministries and in other countries across the continent.

STRENGTHENING CAPACITY FOR FOOD AND NUTRITION LEADERSHIP

Technical capacity is a necessary ingredient of any capacity-strengthening plan, but it will not guarantee successful food and nutrition security policies and programs. Public institutions that implement food and nutrition policies and programs need to function well within an open, representational, and stable system. The process by which food policy is formulated needs to be addressed. Capacity for constructing participatory processes, enhancing regulatory quality, and ensuring accountability and transparency should be strengthened. For example, training on how to manage and develop structures for citizens' forums could help to give the poor a greater voice in the formulation of decisions.

Good governance is essential, but the leadership ability of all players, including political leaders and managers of civil society organizations, is a key component. These leaders need the capacity to bring together stakeholders and to steer multistakeholder processes. They must be able to communicate information in order to enhance effective dialogue, increase public awareness, mobilize resources, and instill elements of good governance. They must also be effective listeners. One way to increase leadership capacity would be to initiate executive programs to develop a food and nutrition leadership cadre

with a broad range of skills and organizational abilities. For example, if community leaders had effective communication, listening, and mobilization skills, they could improve the design and implementation of coping strategies at the grass roots. This would call for ongoing dialogue among various stakeholders to change attitudes, create excitement, and generate empowerment across a broad spectrum of local leaders. People skills that nurture relationships also need to be strengthened.

CONCLUSIONS

Designing and implementing programs that increase food and nutrition security requires strengthening the capacity to design and implement sound policies at the global, national, subnational, and community levels, particularly if the Millennium Development Goal of halving hunger is to be met. To build adequate capacity, organizations (including governments) must be improved, short- and long-term training courses initiated, opportunities for dialogue developed, and information disseminated. To sustain their newly strengthened capacity, institutions must nurture and use it fully. Capacity strengthening will only succeed if local resources are engaged.

The current gaps in capacity are known, but as political, environmental, technical, and social contexts change, new needs will arise. Therefore, constant monitoring of organizational and human skills is essential for the identification of future requirements as they unfold. Unless the capacity to design and implement food and nutrition security policy in Africa is developed, strategies and programs will continue to fail and hunger and malnutrition will grow.

For further reading: E. J. Berg, *Rethinking Technical Cooperation: Reforms for Capacity Building in Africa* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 1993); S. C. Babu, "Food and Nutrition Policies in Africa: Capacity Challenges and Training Options," *African Journal of Food and Nutritional Sciences* 1 (No. 1, 2001): 10–18; C. Eicher and M. Rukuni, *Reflections on Agrarian Reform and Capacity Building in South Africa*, Staff Paper No. 96-3 (East Lansing, USA: Michigan State University, 1996); R. Kanbur, "Helping Hand? The Problem of Technical Assistance in Africa: Review Article," *Journal of African Economies* 4, (No. 2, 1995): 289–300; B. J. Ndulu, "Capacity for Economic Research and the Changing Policy Environment in Africa," *World Development* 25 (No. 5, 1997): 627–630; and D. Kaufman, A. Kraay, and M. Mastruzzi, Governance Matters III: *Governance Indicators for 1996–2002* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2003).

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